

Ten Habits of Highly Successful Piano Teachers

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"Ten Habits of Highly Successful Piano Teachers," AMERICAN MUSIC TEACHER August-September 1993.

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Article:

One of the best ways to learn how to teach is to observe very successful teachers. Yet, in piano pedagogy, we rarely—if ever—have the opportunity to look over the shoulders of the premiere precollege teachers. While there are plenty of public master classes offered by artists for advanced students, that focus and level are not particularly pertinent to the situation the average teacher faces. Cognizant of this serious observational inadequacy, I undertook a study that has been the most revealing and rewarding of my professional life.

First, I asked colleagues throughout the country to help identify leading precollege piano teachers in each region. For the purposes of this study, "leading" meant those individuals who are widely respected by their fellow teachers through the consistent success of their students in competitions.

Next, I contacted each of the premiere teachers whose names were given to me and proposed that I arrange to videotape at least three private lessons of different levels in their studios. I wanted to see each teacher working with an elementary, intermediate and advanced student. I asked them to teach normal, typical lessons. To help ensure unstaged sessions, I promised each participant that the tapes would not be available for public viewing, realizing that we are all a bit on edge when put on display. I was intent on seeing the teachers as they really are. The findings of this study can be immediately useful to all teachers.

Great Expectations

First, and perhaps most importantly, these teachers demanded that students give their all. Extremely high standards were set. Biblical prophecy tells us, "ask and ye shall receive." These teachers certainly live by that motto. They asked a great deal in the way of difficult repertoire and substantial assignments and memory (most pieces were memorized!), and the students gave what the teachers wanted. Students, like most of us in everything we do, usually perform at the level of perceived expectation. We all try to do what is asked of us. The lesson from the tapes is: ask a lot! Expect greatness and you will get it. Shakespeare, as usual, said it best: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings." Just as people are what they eat, they are what they believe. Teachers in the study told their students such things as, "Don't do that to yourself," when the student was ill-prepared, appropriately suggesting that the insult and injury done was to the student and not the teacher. Not one of the teachers made students feel bad or inadequate; respect was always at the core of all the relationships. Rather, when necessary, the teachers were quick to let the student know that he had let himself down, that he could have and should have done better for himself. "Demand it of your-self—be hard on yourself," was how one teacher put it. No excuses were accepted. For instance, when one fifteen-year-old boy complained that he was too tired, the teacher responded, "Too bad you are tired. Collapse after the lesson, but for now work as hard as you can!"

Standards of Artistic Excellence

Second, artistic excellence was an unwavering requirement for even the youngest students. The teachers in the study are all superb musicians, and they turned their full musical attention to every nuance. Students were asked to shape phrases with exquisite beauty, to voice chords, to conjure up dramatic imagery, to sense the rubato, to accent with purpose, and so on. No matter how well the student played a piece, there were always a million

more musical details to be considered. Significant portions of many lessons were devoted to working on only a few measures, but how those measures were analyzed and improved! No more could be asked of the greatest musician on the planet. Every nuance was observed, and musical "perfection" was required. Of course this type of teaching is conceptually based in that students are learning a way of working and thinking and feeling and projecting that they can then apply to any piece. To this end, the teachers in the study worked with passion and drama. Some of the specific tactics they used included:

- giving musical instructions while the student plays
- making arm gestures to demonstrate line
- using metaphoric imagery
- thinking a phrase before playing it
- focusing on the "color" of a phrase or section
- asking a student to describe the mood of the piece
- inquiring after a performance, "What did you like about that playing?" or "What did you not like?"
- dancing a waltz with a student before assigning the student's first waltz
- demonstrating

The use of demonstration was quite striking. Many lessons became musical dialogues between teacher and student; the teacher would play a phrase and the student would play it back again and again until the desired sound and/or gesture was achieved.

Attention to Detail

Third, without exception, these teachers demanded attention to every detail of the printed page. Even though students played mostly from memory, they were expected to have observed all markings, including phrasing, dynamics, articulation, and more. The teachers followed the scores with hawk-like eyes, pouncing on each and every mistake or omission, exacting as perfect a reading as possible.

Teacher Involvement

Fourth, the eleven teachers in the study were noticeably energetic. They were intense, vocal and totally involved. They worked as hard as they expected their students to work, a considerable effort on both parts. There were no dead spots in the lessons, no moments when the teachers sat without communicating in some way. Their voices were strong, their facial expressions and body language were varied, their attention was rapt and focused, and they were totally, completely involved and lid' of energy, often moving into the realm of dramatics and theatrics. They obviously realized, instinctively and intellectually, that enthusiasm begets enthusiasm. More profoundly, they themselves were so totally committed to hard work and excellence that they knew neither alternative nor compromise. Their example served as an inspiration to their students.

However, within this basic environment of zealous devotion, there was a rainbow of personal pedagogical traits. Not all of these successful teachers modeled the exact same behaviors. There were varying degrees of the use of humor and strictness, of praise and correction (though I am pleased to report that not one of these teachers used stickers!). The fact that different personality types achieved the same high level of success once again proves that there is no absolute pattern of perfect pedagogical behavior, and that is, indeed, good news. Teachers do not have to fit any mold other than one requiring superb musicianship, extremely demanding standards, respect for the student, and enthusiasm. The rest will take care of itself.

Attention to Technique

Fifth, the teachers were vitally concerned about careful and appropriate technical preparation for their students. Whenever necessary, they exhorted their charges to maintain firm fingers and a loose wrist, those two seemingly contradictory hallmarks of technical development. Given the observation that these teachers produce pianists who play not only sensitively and imaginatively but also fast and accurately, they must be doing something very right in guiding their students along these lines. Following are some of the technical techniques revealed in the tapes:

- frequent calls for "stronger" or "deeper" or "fingers" to indicate bigger sound and firm fingers
- dominant seventh chords played four times in each position, each time voicing a different finger
- appropriate down/up wrist motions
- five-finger patterns, moving up and down a scale diatonically, dropping on 1-5 together, then 2-3-4 with an up motion; then repeating the 2-3-4 cluster 2, 3, or 4 times; then playing the pattern on the tonic, jumping up an octave, jumping back down to supertonic, up an octave, back down to the mediant, and so on.
- various octave exercises, including hand and wrist octaves
- five-finger patterns played slowly, watching for firm, raised, curved fingers with everything loose, first staccato, then legato
- five-finger patterns played hands together, but with contrasting articulations and/or dynamics
- major/minor triads played hands together in all keys and inversions, moving up chromatically (this with a six-year-old student)
- finger legato exercise played 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5-4, 4-3, 3-2, 2-1 with fingers only—no wrist
- teacher noted unnecessary tension by placing fingers lightly on student's tight cheeks and shoulders
- Hanon used imaginatively, for example, contrasting dynamics/articulation between the hands or "fast Hanon" or "fast Czerny" in which the student reprises a Hanon or Czerny that had been learned slowly a few weeks earlier but is now played as fast as possible.

Particularly intriguing were the approaches to teaching scales:

- student chanted scale fingerings as he played them hands together, saying the left hand number first, then the right hand number (this with an eight-year-old student)
- student played scales legato and then leggiero (lightly, fingers only, no wrist or arm motion, slightly detached)
- students played scales hands together four octaves in sixteenth notes, starting on C, then to C-sharp, then to D, and so on through all keys; the metronome speed was increased one click with each half step transposition; the metronome was set at a slow pulse at first and got quite fast by the end of the exercise, culminating at 168, to the total amazement of the students (this with ten- and eleven-year-old students)
- student who could play scales hands together was asked to play them hands separately while the teacher analyzed every detail (shoulders, fingers, arms, hands, feet, head)
- student was asked to play scales very slowly as the teacher commented: "It has to be perfect; think ahead, go as slow as you need to--it has to be perfect; this isn't for the fingers, it's for the brain" (this with a fourteen-year-old student)
- student played scales in thirds and sixths (this with a ten-year-old student)
- teacher demonstrated scales to student, asking him to watch everything (this with a six-year-old student)
- student was asked to play scales in long-short-short-short rhythms with the following advice from the teacher: "the longer you spend on the long notes, the shorter you spend on the short notes, and the more you think, the better;" the student was also cautioned not to move his wrist up and down on the long notes
- student was asked to play scales with an accent on every ninth note: in F major, accent F, then G, then A, then B-flat (this with a ten-year-old student).
- teacher advised a student who was about to play a Bach F major invention to play the F major scale as if it were a "Bach scale, as if it were on a harpsichord"
- teacher advised a student to "play your scale stunningly, as if you were Horowitz," leading the student to play the scale much more forcefully (this with a ten-year-old student)
- student played scales in four-octave, four-note accented groups, first with accents on the tonic and subsequently every fifth note all the way up and back down; then, without stopping, the student switched to an accent pattern that started on the supertonic, every fifth note up and down; then the accent came on the mediant, and so forth (this with a ten-year-old student).

Using Questions

Sixth, most of the teachers were expert in their questioning techniques. They asked their students to think for themselves as often as possible. Teachers frequently turned students' questions back on them: "How do you want it inflected?" or "How do you want it to sound?" or "What do you want to do with that passage?" Requiring—forcing—students to think for themselves is the best way we can teach them to teach themselves, and these teachers understand that. They tend to ask more questions than they answer, giving students increasing freedom to make choices.

These are the precollege teachers who participated in the study:

Jane Allen, St. Louis, Missouri
Marilyn Brown, Raleigh, North Carolina
Clara Jean Curzon, Shell Beach, California
Suzanne Guy, Annandale, Virginia
E. L. Lancaster, Norman, Oklahoma
Jane Magrath, Norman, Oklahoma
Emilio del Rosario, Chicago, Illinois
Boyce Sher, Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Karen Taylor, Bloomington, Indiana
John Weems, Houston, Texas
Jennie Windle, Berkeley, California

By allowing me to study them, these eleven teachers have provided invaluable insight into the art and science of piano teaching. Their individual and collective contributions have made a manifestly significant contribution to the profession. They have been most gracious to share the methods and approaches that have served their students so well over the years. Their "secrets" of success, so long admired, revered and envied, are herein laid bare.

Counting

Seventh, counting was deemed to be absolutely essential by all eleven teachers. Some of the tactics they used to play in time were:

- student was asked to count aloud using "ta" and "ti," and "sh" on the rests
- student was advised to constantly repeat a word with the appropriate number of syllables while playing; for instance, "beau-ti-ful" for a 3/4 piece (this with a six-year-old student)
- student was taught to employ micro-counting, which is finding the smallest note value in the piece and then sensing that as the underlying pulse throughout the entire piece (this with a ten-year-old student)
- students were required to count aloud whenever there were rhythmic problems
- students were often advised to practice repertoire with the metronome, usually at a very slow speed.

Teaching Sight-Reading

Eighth, the development of sight-reading skills was considered extremely important by all eleven teachers. They spent time in nearly all lessons on reading, and they have created some intriguing methods of teaching it. One teacher, for instance, starts each lesson by giving the student an unfamiliar piece. The teacher and student discuss it for about five minutes. The teacher then leaves the room for approximately ten minutes, during which time the student prepares the piece as best he can. When the teacher returns, the piece is performed, and the teacher discusses with the student how certain problems and passages might have been worked out more efficiently. The student is learning how to sight-read while also learning how to work. The teacher, who has employed this technique for about three years, is exceedingly enthusiastic about its value.

Another teacher plays duets with students during sight-reading to promote steadiness; she also insists that the student count aloud during reading. The same teacher often closes the fallboard and asks the student to hear inwardly the piece to be sight read, carefully studying the score for all details. Further, this same teacher occasionally works on sight-reading by letting the student see a measure for just a second or two, then covering it while asking the student about what he glimpsed or asking him to play it.

One teacher keeps a stack of music on the end of the piano; students are asked to take home a different book each week for sight reading work. This same teacher frequently points at the notes on the page during sight-reading to keep the student's eyes directed on the page, not the keyboard. Further, this teacher sometimes plays the sight-reading piece for the student after the initial run through to demonstrate nuance and line; the student then has a second chance to read the same piece.

Good Practice Habits

Ninth, the teachers were very helpful in teaching students how to practice. For instance, some of the teachers told their young students exactly how many times to practice a piece each day, and at a precise metronome speed that might increase every two to three days. When new repertoire was assigned, the teachers tended to spend a considerable amount of lesson time discussing the piece before sending the student home with it.

Regarding repetition in practice, one teacher scolded a student who played the same passage several times with the same errors, "It's mindless to repeat the same passage with the same mistakes." She then showed him how to practice the passage slowly and correctly. With a six-year-old student, this same teacher wrote precise practice instructions for the week in the student's assignment book.

Another teacher asked students to spend a few minutes in lessons practicing while pretending the teacher was not present. The teacher looked on without interrupting; when the student would ask a question, the teacher would respond, "I'm not here." After this "practice" segment of the lesson, the teacher discussed ways to improve the efficiency of practice. Another teacher asked a student to play the first part of a piece (one that was still in a study stage) at a performance tempo. Next he asked the student what he did not like about the playing, and they then discussed practice techniques to fix the problems.

Including Theory

Tenth, theory work was an important part of many lessons. Teachers required all students, even the youngest ones, to respond constantly to questions about theory: "What's the key signature of this scale?" or "What is the relative minor?" or "What is the parallel major?" or "What is the tonic note of the Dorian mode with two sharps?" While the amount of time spent on theory varied from teacher to teacher and student to student, the value placed on a solid theoretical underpinning was evident. Also, and most important, all of the teachers made theory a keyboard-related, interactive part of lessons. It was never relegated to mere completion of sheets in a workbook.

Miscellany

Finally, there were isolated pedagogical tactics and comments that are not easily grouped under a single heading. These teachers are so successful and original that everything they did is worth noting. Following are additional observations gleaned from the tapes:

- teacher checks off pieces in one of three ways: PG = Pass Good; PVG = Pass Very Good; or PVG!; the students all work for PVG!, but it is given seldom and only for the best reasons
- teacher said, "Not just loud, but dramatic," demonstrating her belief that dynamic indications by themselves are a poor substitute for the underlying human emotion that prompted them
- teacher asked each student to go out and run/walk around the block in the middle of lessons; the break revitalized the student
- "Voicing is the thing that brings us closest to artistry"
- "The longer the phrase, the greater the artist"

- "Make 'dramatic faces' in the playing to add character"
- "Play it so I want to sway on my piano bench."

Through this study, I feel quite certain that I have been graced with the privilege of seeing some of our finest precollege piano teachers working in their everyday settings. From them I have learned much of lasting value. My sincere hope is that via this article, many of my colleagues will experience the same benefits.